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ANTHROPOLOGY AND ADVOCACY: OFF OF THE FENCE AND INTO THE FORAY

Lindsey Huculiak

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ADVOCACY

Defining moral obligations in any discipline is a complex task. Few fields, like psychology, have 'hard and steadfast' rules concerning ethical understanding. Other professionals, like medical practitioners have more widely acknowledged moral obligations to their patients. In some arenas, like business, ethical practices can be sporadic and erratic, and subject to a variety of interpretations. Even the legal system, whose very existence rests upon a search for definition and the enforcement of morality contains many contradictions in defining moral and immoral acts. The common law system for example, is based not upon a cohesive pattern of actions, but upon exemplars of behaviour, whose moral siding is regularly subject to intense scrutiny, often resulting in a revision of moral coding. Above all, one thing is certain: there is no underlying universally held ideology of what constitutes good and bad.

Often anthropologists are called upon to describe their professional versions of events, societies, or practices to interested organizations or individuals. The questions involved in deciding for whom to advocate, on what grounds, and with which information, are closely tied to the search for anthropological morality. Anthropology can play a key role in mediating between or in testifying for or against parties, yet there are no formal conventions for classifying certain materials, even if the

anthropologist may view those materials as privileged and potentially damaging. The point at which the anthropologist can divulge information without breaking moral obligations is unclear, since no clear ethical code exists for anthropology.

Given such an unstable basis for determining the ethical obligations of any discipline, is there hope that anthropology can carve out its own sense of morality? The American Psychological Association has a document outlining rules of conduct for its psychologists. For anthropologists, however, there are pressures unrealized by psychologists. For example, the complex relationships between individuals, cultures, nations, and states all play largely in determining the actions of the anthropologist. The possible large-scale effects of anthropological interventions are a calculating factor in determining for whom and for what to advocate. Numerous problems face the Anthropologist who is trying to decide for whom, how, and when to advocate. Then as Hastrup and Elsas posit, why not abstain from advocacy, since advocacy and anthropology have such irreconcilable differences (1990:301)?

UNINVITED GUESTS

As enticing as it may be to refrain from intervention, is it even a viable possibility? What previously separated anthropologists from activists was their unwillingness to enter into the foray, due

to a moral and professional obligation to remain participant observers. As the amount of evidence of anthropologists intervening in societies increases, (Hastrup and Elsass 1990), it appears that the role of the anthropologist is evolving into that of the "observant participant" (Turner 1991:309).

It may be that anthropologists owe their interaction to the societies they study. Anthropology traditionally sends people to distant lands to study rural societies. These communities are expected to welcome the new intruder, to accept his or her daily presence and continual prodding without asking anything in return. If anthropologists make a living by imposing themselves upon other societies, should they not be expected to use some of their knowledge as a means of helping those societies? Their expertise is in helping to preserve tradition, and by virtue of this, would be the last ones to attempt to replace tradition with modern capitalist notions of development.

Perhaps the world is ready for anthropology to give volume to the voices of the people it studies. Many anthropologists have opined for a 'useful anthropology' that could provide information that would in some way be useful to the world outside academia (Godelier 1994; Barth 1994). To be useful it must be truthful and honest; perhaps these are the only two tenets that can be agreed upon in anthropology at this time. In order to produce such credible work, anthropology has no choice but to attempt the codification of moral obligations to be practiced by its members. By writing a formal code of ethics and enforcing statements of professional responsibility, anthropologists can guarantee the quality of their work to communities of study, and help decode it for the general public.

DEFINING MORALITY

Roy D'Andrade emphasizes that *linguistic confounding* must be considered the root of the problem behind morality (1995:399). Semantically, a moral action can be defined as an act in favour of promoting or upholding notions of goodness. The lines drawn for such 'moral goodness' are what dissect morality into its unequal, jumbled parts. Of great importance to anthropologists is determining for whom moral obligations are enacted (Tonkinson 1997; Hastrup and Elsass 1990). Ethnicity, by its very nature defines the differences between groups, and may even put the ideologies of two groups in opposition. The solid ground on which to plant the moral flag is determined by whose camp one visits. The lack of solidarity of a single ethnic group on a single topic has often caused anthropologists a nightmare in ethical rendering (Tonkinson 1997; Hastrup and Elsass 1990).

Even those issues that appear to be clear cut can be redefined to create a convoluted representation of reality. Take ethnocentrism for example. To have pride in one's ethnicity is hardly a crime, and is promoted worldwide; yet some would argue that ethnocentrism could be misrepresented as a form of racism (Geertz 1994). The preservation of culture may even be seen by some as a means of survival (Tonkinson 1997:8). The division between pride and prejudice, however, is thin, and it is anthropology that must deal with the disentanglement between the two. The moral necessity of promoting culture may have often been enacted to the detriment of another culture, and as categories of 'moral' and 'immoral' are hardly ever mutually exclusive, a degree of interpretation is necessary.

Interpretation presents a problem in its own right. Anthropologists have come to realize that they must situate themselves in the course of their ethnographies (Nader 1994). The ethnographer's very presence in the community has ramifications that cannot be ignored (Hastrup and Elsass 1990). Turner (1991) notes that the media attention brought to distant communities not only strengthens the communities' sense of pride in culture, but may actually present a forum for culture to be showcased as a means of meeting social and cultural ends. One must therefore acknowledge that the society of study has been irreversibly altered by the intrusion of anthropology.

Hastrup and Elsass describe their presence in the Arhuaco community as having the power to "split Arhuaco society further. Advocacy was difficult under these circumstances, and anthropological advocacy seemed impossible" (1990:305). Life in that village did not go on as if one were a 'fly on the wall'. The very method of information collection requires the interaction of anthropologist and subject of study. The relationship between anthropologist and community cannot be ignored as there are real consequences for both sides. The interpreted version of any society's culture will be different according to who tells the story: the citizens of that culture, or the anthropologist that observes it. No single viewpoint is sufficient nor accurate enough to convey an understanding of any society. Thus any single event may be interpreted in many ways.

The rendering of any interpretation can offer more, or less, support for the ideological value placed on a given culture. The accountability that anthropologists cultivate is, therefore, not only to their employing

agencies, but to the subjects and audiences of their work as well. To provide an accurate representation of a society is one of the greatest responsibilities the anthropologist has; it is also possibly the hardest feat to accomplish.

WITNESSING

Whereas one might think it not so difficult to choose the more ethical side of an argument thus rendering a moral code moot, Godelier (1994) illustrates how one person's good may be seen as another person's evil. His article defines the act of *witnessing*, which is one of the latest roles some anthropologists have taken on. The job of being an expert witness should be well suited to the anthropologist: given his or her training in detailed note taking and observation and the immersion into the lifestyle of the studied society. The anthropologist may be the best individual outside of the native community to describe the given culture. As anthropological tenants advise, anthropology should interpret the life of the native for those outside of the native society, so as to bridge any cultural barriers in understanding.

Godelier describes a case in which he testifies for a defendant of Baruya culture who is charged with murdering his wife. By citing that cultural law gave the defendant the right to mercilessly hack his wife to pieces in a field, Godelier advocated on the side of culture, rather than for individual freedom to life (Godelier 1994:98). Godelier marks his conviction of his moral standpoint by challenging other anthropologists to consider their actions in the same situation. He states that his actions were guided by ethics and science, and he declares that other

anthropologists "would not necessarily have shared my scruples about helping to propagate the 'true' faith" (1994:98). Whether Godelier's true faith is the Baruya culture, anthropology, or law, is unclear. What evident, however, is the controversial nature of Godelier's decisions, which to him seem natural, but to many may seem immoral. As seen in the Godelier case, the anthropologist must decide for himself or herself when and where intervention is necessary, and which side to support.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE LAW

The Godelier case illustrates a particular problem posed to anthropologists: if local courts begin using anthropological testimony of cultural norms in deciding the fate of murderers, the door is open to possible misuse by anthropologists or non-anthropologists alike. One should take careful consideration before equating a cultural norm with legal rights. While some cultures accept that some forms of murder are unavoidable and should go unpunished (like self-defense), others condone murder as a punishment for criminals (like death sentencing). It is unlikely that open murder as a method of legal enforcement at the hand of citizens is supported by many cultures. When anthropologists support the view that events such as murder or torture are culturally constructed and thus justified, they place unnecessary power in the hands of individuals outside legal systems (see Godelier 1994). Should the 'culture defense' become popular, suspects could plead memberships to cultures from which they are really not affiliated, or in which they are not located during the crime.

It is appropriate that individuals, such as anthropologists, who are privy to information that others are not, should be able to provide expert testimony in areas of their expertise. Yet one can see the difficulty in advocating on behalf of an individual in sensitive cases. This should prove especially difficult for anthropologists, who are generally taught not to judge others, but rather to accept, observe, and record. In dealing with foreign cultures the best anthropologists are those who are willing to be open minded about events that may seem alien. Ultimately, knowledge and experience must be tempered with common sense and morality. Anthropological testimony should no doubt be a helpful tool in the legal system, but it is only a piece in the larger puzzle of understanding circumstance, context, and motive.

In the vein of creating a 'useful' version of anthropological research, one must examine how the world that is unacquainted with anthropology can be informed by it. The interaction between anthropology and public opinion has often been strained. Anthropologists may be viewed with suspicion by natives, regarded with mistrust by officials, and can be subject to the continual criticism of members of their own discipline. Finding a prominent place within anthropology is no doubt difficult, let alone one that is easily applicable to popular problems. Perhaps another example of anthropology at trial will illustrate a contrast between the ways in which anthropology and the general public view the world.

A recent anthropological blunder into the legal system is described by Robert Paine's article "In Chief Justice McEachern's Shoes: Anthropology's Ineffectiveness in Court" (1996). Paine outlines the inability of the discipline to

support the actions of individuals outside of the academic world. The major problem in this court case was the anthropologists' inability to present evidence to the court that could be deemed factual. The case involved a land claim of the Giksan Wet'suwet'en people of British Columbia. They recounted stories of their history, as a basis for their right to claim particular land, and hired anthropologists to provide testimony that would aid in the translation of their culture to the general Canadian public. Since modern Western society places an emphasis on written records as proof of historical events, any culture that relies upon oral tradition for such information faces a losing battle. In this case, anthropologists failed to equate oral tradition with written tradition, and were unable to convince the judge to see life from the Natives' perspective.

The prosecution were able to use the anthropologists' close ties with the Giksan Wet'suwet'en people to demonstrate that rather than being expert witnesses, they were in fact hostile ones. The reason for this judgment was that the anthropologists would be inclined to present testimony that was biased in favour of the Natives. The treatment that the anthropologists received while on the stand was unexpected, because they had no real understanding of the meaning of *expert witness* as it pertained to the Canadian legal system, and may have altered their abilities to provide important information.

Another other flaw of the anthropologists in this case was their inability to come to one concrete conclusion on which a ruling could be based. Since anthropologists openly advocate that there are more than one acceptable interpretation of the facts, how is any jury to find evidence in their testimonies (Paine 1996:61)? Paine

specifically characterizes the chief aim of anthropologists in this case to "on the one hand, de-exoticize the construction, and on the other, avoid presenting it as factually true... but as a truth of cultural distinction" (1996:62). To make an individual understand something complex, Paine suggests that culture must be made familiar, and he notes the anthropologists' abysmal failure at this task during the course of the trial, where "the exotic, indeed the arcane, was left uninterpreted, the philosophically complex rendered bizarre" (1996:62). Proving a point to the public is clearly a different task than supporting an argument in an anthropological text.

The moral obligation of the anthropologist in such a case wavers between packaging information in a manner which is clearly understandable to the layperson and therefore requiring alteration of the facts, or continuing to produce ethnographies that are deemed biased by some legal systems, and therefore useless to the causes of the societies one studies. Thus should an anthropologist dilute the facts and insist upon a single interpretation for the sake of the law? The value placed upon testimony is that it reflects a single, honest interpretation - a view that suggests that other interpretations are somehow falsified.

An example of this dilemma is the meager difference between dream and reality in aboriginal culture, in contrast to modern white populations in which the two are very distinct (Paine 1996:61). To reconcile these polarities, the anthropologist must translate the differences into similarities. Such a challenge could possibly result in the rendering of untruthful facts in the aim of meeting an honest goal. The anthropologist must sometimes debate between relaying honesty through the

means or in reaching it at the end. Given that an anthropologist has volunteered to aid in providing expert witness in a trial, it becomes difficult to produce testimony that is applicable and valid, with which a group could reach a reasonable consensus.

Anthropology's failure to provide a background for understanding the anthropological perspective, and to outline some of the basic tenants upon which ethnography is based, resulted in a failure to help the Giksan Wet'suwet'en case. The longed for 'usefulness' of anthropology can only become realized if the discipline is able to de-codify its principles, to bring its seemingly esoteric ideology out into the sunlight.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND OBJECTIVITY

It is difficult enough for a single individual anthropologist to advocate support of a cause, but often anthropologists also find themselves pitted against one another, in a battle for some group's rights, and for their own prestige. Varied interpretation is the cornerstone of this bullfight, and the anthropologist that is able to build a more objective case is likely to win. This is no small task considering the subjective material upon which most of anthropology is based.

Tonkinson points out that "the principle that we deal with 'partial truths' is an article of faith in postmodernist critiques of ethnography" (1997: 14). Just as culture is subjective, so is its interpretation. The very heart of anthropology is its ability to be ambivalent. It can accommodate dissent and criticism, and build upon the principles which challenges it.

So what then of the fate of objectivity? D'Andrade suggests that

even objective accounts can apply values to a subject (1995:399). Perhaps supreme objectivity is impossible outside of science, since the reader, if not the anthropologist, may assign value to any statement which appears value-free. Evaluating statements which many seem without value is a construct of human thought, aimed at placing one's newly acquired knowledge into a schema, part of which relies upon knowing if something is good or bad, detrimental or beneficial. Thus the interpretation of even objective events may rely on an individual understanding of those events. Especially in a social science of understanding humanity, individuals are likely to seek motivation behind action, and thus assign some kind of value to seemingly neutral activities.

Since interpretation is a readily practiced human construct, anthropologists have no choice but to accept the validity of all sides of the argument. They must take into consideration all histories, and all genealogies, because the discipline is built upon the study of *people*, whose interaction with the physical, mental, and mythical environments shapes their conceptions of their very surroundings. Anthropology has determined that there are no archetypal individuals who can define the norm of interpretation, nor are there prototypical societies that have similarities to all other societies.

Thus a moral code for advocacy must be drawn at an individual level. The individual must subscribe to certain tenets of behaviour and this collective individualism is what will define the code of ethics for anthropology. A collection of patterns of behaviour by anthropologists could form the basic sphere for acceptable action. Based upon these exemplars, codification of the ethics of anthropology could be created.

Education of the anthropologist in addition to practical experience, is the only realistic method for creating such a unified code of ethics.

The first step to creating a moral code has already been taken. Some universities offer fourth year undergraduate courses where students are faced with the sticky topic of ethics. Perhaps for the first time they are able to grapple with the notions of morality and justice from their own, and others', points of view. Education is the key to forging the ethical path, and perhaps other courses in anthropological ethics should be offered to supplement all of the other courses. Perhaps even the inclusion of philosophical anthropology courses could provide students with the framework to act logically and morally especially in instances where such options seem unclear.

To address the question of applying anthropology to make it a more useful discipline, again education may be an initial start particularly in light of the recent trend of anthropological law, for which little formal training is currently available. Some authors, like Sally Falk Moore (1978) work with anthropology and the law and would be able to show students how to frame their questions and statements in a manner applicable to both the general public and in acceptable legal forums. The legal arena is an area which could benefit from the expertise offered by anthropologists, if anthropologists are able to supply information with which legal representatives can work.

THE MORAL FUTURE

It is also the responsibility of anthropology at large to inform the public of its efforts. Many people do not even know what an anthropologist does,

let alone how anthropological information can be of value. Perhaps by using the recent trend of packaging and marketing disciplines for public consumption, anthropology could better align itself within the spotlight. Anthropologists are witnesses to some of the most interesting human practices, and also to the vilest human abuses. Scheper-Hughes asks "to what end are we given and do we represent these images as long as the misery and the suffering continue unabated?" (D'Andrade and Scheper-Hughes 1995:416). Here anthropological intervention can not only bring relief to suffering people, but it can use those images to promote the good of which anthropology is capable, and may educate the general public at the same time. While Taussig (1992; as cited in D'Andrade and Scheper Hughes 1995:416) warns that desensitization is a quick mechanism used by many to dull the reality of harsh environments. Perhaps it is up to anthropology to bring such issues into the light of reality and promote conscious awareness of global situations.

To carry on the work that anthropology has completed to date, it seems essential that a formal document outlining the responsibilities of anthropologists should be drafted. While it may only outline the barest bones of common sense, if nothing else it would promote open discussion of acceptable and unacceptable actions. In addition, instituting an ethics review committee, which could be consulted during periods of uncertainty, would take the pressure off of individual anthropologists to make decisions on their own. Knowledge in this domain should be shared, and a community of anthropologists should be available for support.

Without some support group or formal statement of moral objectives, an

individual is left with nothing but his or her own judgment in making important decisions. While ultimately such decisions *are* individual, the ability to consult other resources seems to be an appropriate measure. At least under the umbrella of a comprehensive moral agreement, can the many-fractured discipline of anthropology gain a sense of cohesion. Not only would ethics documentation add to the credibility of the discipline, but it would also provide greater insurance that anthropologists are able to make well-educated, sound decisions in emotionally charged situations.

CONCLUSION

Bringing morality together with advocacy has never been an easy task. Granted that it is difficult to decipher on whose account and on what basis to advocate, however, anthropologists should nevertheless avoid the assumption that removing advocacy from their field is a reasonable alternative. As in many fields of anthropology, a *multi-sided* approach to advocacy is perhaps the best present mode of action. By creating a support network through an ethics committee, anthropologists can draw on the experience of others when grappling with difficult moral decisions. While interpretation is subjective, decisions will ultimately be made on the anthropologist's best personal judgment. It is therefore up to universities to stress methods of moral reasoning in their courses. The institution of a moral code of action for anthropology may one day be possible, and would provide anthropologists with greater accountability to the general public than they currently enjoy. Anthropology's future, without such a code, will lead to

the same inefficiencies as has been experienced in the past with regards to legal advocacy. Anthropology should be a forum through which the voice of the subaltern is heard, and, it can meet this mandate of providing necessary services to the world. Such goals are only possible, however, if anthropological material can be rendered easily understood by the general public, and by following moral standards set out by the discipline.

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